



# Combating Al Qaeda's Splinters: Mishandling Suicide Terrorism

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# Combating Al Qaeda's Splinters

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**Al Qaeda may be weakening but smaller, more decentralized networks arguably present harder challenges—including suicide terrorism. Here's a closer look at the evolving threat and what to do about it.**



## Mishandling Suicide Terrorism

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The past three years saw more suicide attacks than the last quarter century. Most of them were religiously motivated. Repeated suicide actions show that massive counterforce alone does not diminish the frequency or intensity of suicide attack. Like pounding mercury with a hammer, this sort of top-heavy counterstrategy only seems to generate more varied and insidious forms of suicide terrorism. Even with many top Al Qaeda leaders now dead or in custody, the transnational jihadist fraternity is transforming into a hydra-headed network more difficult to fight than before.

Poverty and lack of education per se are not root causes of suicide terrorism. Nor do Muslims who have expressed support for martyr actions and trust in Osama bin Laden or the late Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin as a rule hate democratic freedoms or Western culture, although many of these Muslims do despise U.S. foreign policy, especially in the Middle East. Rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations, particularly regarding civil liberties, are critical factors in generating support for suicide terrorism.

The United States, Israel, Russia, and other nations on the frontline in the war on terrorism need to realize that military and counterinsurgency actions are tactical, not strategic, responses to suicide terrorism—the most politically destabilizing and psychologically devastating form of terrorism. When these nations back oppressive and unpopular governments (even those deemed “partners in the war on terror”), this only generates popular resentment and support for terrorism against those governments as well as their backers. To attract potential recruits away from jihadist martyrdom—suicide terrorism’s most virulent strain—and to dry up its popular support

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requires addressing basic grievances before a downward spiral sets in, where core meaning in life is sought and found in religious networks that sanctify vengeance at any cost against stronger powers, even if it kills the avenger.

## **The Growing Threat of Suicide Terrorism**

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Suicide attacks have become more prevalent globally, gaining in strategic importance with disruptive effects that cascade on the political, economic, and social routines of national life and international relations. The first major contemporary suicide attack was the December 1981 bombing of the Iraqi embassy in Beirut, probably by Iranian agents, that left 27 dead and more than 100 injured. From 1980 to 2001, political scientist Robert Pape observed that 188 suicide attacks took place, most for nonreligious motives.<sup>1</sup> According to an August 2003 congressional report "Terrorists and Suicide Attacks," this represented only three percent of terrorist attacks worldwide during this time period but accounted for nearly half of all deaths.<sup>2</sup>

The history of suicide bombings since the early 1980s demonstrates how such attacks have generally achieved attackers' near-term strategic goals, such as forcing withdrawal from areas subject to attack, causing destabilization, and demonstrating vulnerability by radically upsetting life routines. In Lebanon, Hizballah ("Party of God") initiated the first systematic contemporary suicide attack campaign in 1983, killing hundreds of U.S. and French soldiers in coordinated truck bombings and compelling the United States and France to withdraw their remaining forces. Hizballah had dramatically reduced its strategic reliance on suicide bombing by 1992 when it decided to participate in parliamentary elections and become a "mainstream" political party after achieving its main objective of forcing Israel to abandon most of the territorial and political gains made during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad used suicide attacks effectively to derail the 1995 Oslo Interim Agreement that was designed to serve as the foundation of a peace process between Palestinians and Israelis. In Sri Lanka, Tamil Eelam ("Tamil Homeland") only recently suspended its suicide squads of Tamil Tigers after wresting control of Tamil areas from the Sinhalese-dominated government and forcing official recognition of some measure of Tamil autonomy. Suicide bombings by Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia in the spring of 2003 preceded a drastic reduction in the U.S. military and civilian presence in the country. Of course, the September 11 attacks themselves were suicide attacks.

Newer trends since the start of the millennium pose distinct challenges, making the threat posed by suicide terrorism not only more prominent in recent years but also more frequently religiously motivated. From 2000 to

2003, more than 300 suicide attacks killed more than 5,300 people in 17 countries and wounded many thousands more.<sup>3</sup> At least 70 percent of these attacks were religiously motivated, with more than 100 attacks by Al Qaeda or affiliates acting in Al Qaeda's name.

Even more ominous, Islamic jihadi groups are now networked in ways that permit "swarming" by actors contracted from different groups who strike from scattered locations on multiple targets and then disperse, only to form new swarms. Multiple, coordinated suicide attacks across countries and even continents is the adaptive hallmark of Al Qaeda's continued global web-making. The war in Iraq has energized so many disparate groups that the jihadist network is better prepared than ever to carry on without bin Laden.<sup>4</sup> The International Institute of Strategic Studies in London is reporting that "[t]he counterterrorism effort has perversely impelled an already highly decentralized and evasive transnational terrorist network to become more 'virtual' and protean and, therefore, harder to identify and neutralize."<sup>5</sup>

**Poverty and lack of education *per se* are not root causes of suicide terrorism.**

Each country in which suicide attack has occurred has seen people become more suspicious and afraid of one another. Emboldened by the strategic successes of suicide-sponsoring terrorist organizations in upsetting the long-term political calculations and daily living routines of its foes as well as by increasing support and recruitment among Muslim populations angered by U.S. actions in Iraq, jihadi groups believe they are proving able to mount a lengthy and costly war of attrition. Even U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld lamented that "[t]he cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists' cost of millions."<sup>6</sup>

The longer this war of attrition lasts, the greater the long-term strategic risk of radicalizing Muslim sentiment against the United States, of undermining the United States' international alliances, and of causing serious and sustained discontent among the American people. A White House panel reported in October 2003 that Muslim hostility toward the United States "has reached shocking levels" and is growing steadily.<sup>7</sup> Margaret Tutwiler, under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, bemoaned to a congressional committee in February 2004 that "[i]t will take us many years of hard, focused work" to restore the United States' credibility, even among traditional allies.<sup>8</sup> Most Americans today feel no safer from terrorism, are more distrustful of many long-standing allies, and are increasingly anxious about the future. A survey released in the early spring of 2004 by the non-partisan Council for Excellence in Government found that fewer than half

of all Americans think the country is safer than it was on September 11, 2001, and more than three-quarters expect the United States to be the target of a major terrorist attack in the near future.<sup>9</sup>

There is good reason to be anxious. One distinct pattern in the litany of terrorist atrocities is that there has been an increasing interest in well-planned attacks designed to net the highest numbers of civilian casualties. Charting data from the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Robert Axelrod, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, observes that a very few terrorist attacks account for a very large percentage of all casualties. Not only does this trend call for anticipating attacks with ever broader political, economic, and social effects, it also seems to point to an eventual suicide attack using chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons. Although that may take some time to plan effectively, long-term planning has proven to be Al Qaeda's hallmark.

"God has ordered us to build nuclear weapons," proclaimed Fazlur Rahman Khalil of Pakistan's Harkat ul-Mujahideen on U.S. television.<sup>10</sup> A subsequent suicide attack on India's parliament in December 2001 by Jaish-e-Muhammed, a Pakistani splinter group of the Al Qaeda affiliate that Khalil heads, perhaps brought nuclear war closer than at any time since the Cuban missile crisis.<sup>11</sup> Imagine what these people could do with the unconventional weapons they actively seek.

In sum, terrorists are becoming increasingly effective by using suicide attacks, and the trend points to a catastrophic unconventional terrorist attack that could make the March 11 attacks in Madrid and the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington pale in comparison. The U.S. strategic response relies on overwhelming military force to crush evolving jihadist swarms, but this inflexible and maladaptive strategy only propagates leaner and meaner mutations of suicide networks and cells.

## **Suicide Terror Today**

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Repeated suicide actions in the disputed regions of Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and now in U.S.-occupied Iraq show that military action alone has not stopped or even reliably diminished the incidence of suicide attacks. For example, from 1993 through 2003, 311 Palestinian suicide attackers launched themselves against Israeli targets. In the first seven years of suicide bombing, 70 percent (43 of 61 attempts) were successful in killing other people. From the start of the second Intifada in September 2000 through 2003, however, although the success rate declined to 52 percent, the number of attacks increased from 61 to 250, with 129 of those being successful (up from 43).<sup>12</sup>

The trend is even more alarming in Iraq and elsewhere. On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq and “one victory in the war on terror that began on 9/11.”<sup>13</sup> Cofer Black, the Department of State’s coordinator for counterterrorism, declared soon thereafter that Al Qaeda had to “put up or shut up. ... They had failed. It proves the global war on terrorism is effective.”<sup>14</sup> Within just two weeks, however, a wave of jihadist suicide bombings hit Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Israel, and Chechnya. Collectively, these attacks were more numerous and widespread than any in the preceding 12 months.

In October 2003, five full months after major military operations had been declared over, Iraq suffered its worst spate of suicide bombings to date. White House claims that such attacks only confirmed the “desperation”<sup>15</sup> of terrorists in the face of increasing U.S. progress in the war on terrorism provided little evidence that the military response was working and were ridiculed by Arab commentators.<sup>16</sup> A November 2003 suicide attack on Italian forces in southern Iraq convinced several countries not to participate in the military occupation and spurred the United States to accelerate its timetable for transferring authority to Iraqis.

Outside Iraq, also in November, suicide bombings in Turkey by self-declared friends of Al Qaeda sought to undermine the best example of nonsectarian and democratic rule in the Muslim world and extended the strategic threat to NATO’s underbelly. In December 2003, renewed attacks by Chechnya’s “black widows” (women allowed by militant Islamic leaders to become martyrs, usually because of what Russian soldiers have done to their husbands, fathers, and brothers) brought terror to Russian civilians. During the year-end holidays, alerts for Al Qaeda suicide skyjackings brought continuous air patrols and surface-to-air missiles to major U.S. cities and caused cancellations of several international flights. Pakistan’s President Gen. Pervez Musharraf barely escaped assassination on Christmas Day when two suicide truck bombers from Jaish-e-Muhammed rammed his motorcade.

All of this occurred despite the fact that State Department funding for counterstrategies to combat terrorism overseas increased 133 percent from September 11, 2001, through fiscal year 2003, according to the final U.S. federal interagency report.<sup>17</sup> Including the Iraq theater (originally billed as a war of necessity to deny weapons of mass destruction to Al Qaeda and its associates), U.S. Department of Defense budget increases and emergency supplemental measures—the bill for foreign operations in the war on terror-

**The jihadist network is better prepared than ever to carry on without bin Laden.**



ism into 2004—exceeds \$200 billion. Yet, the incidence and impact of suicide terrorism have not declined. Of course, not all of this hard-power spending on terrorism is wasted, but the nearly exclusive reliance on military might has not stifled the martyr's appeal or stalled the threat.

In fact, 2003 witnessed more suicide attacks (98) than any year in contemporary history. A plurality (33) occurred in Iraq, now plagued with suicide terror for the first time since the thirteenth-century *hashasheen* ("assassins") slaughtered fellow Muslims and Crusaders to purify Islamic

lands (it took the Mongols to stop them). In the first three months of 2004, more than three dozen suicide attackers struck six U.S. allies (2 attackers in Afghanistan; 18 in Iraq; 2 in Pakistan; 8 in Israel; 1 in Turkey; and at least 5 female bombers in Uzbekistan, a first-time target of suicide terror) killing more than 600 people and wounding thousands. In Iraq alone (which has so far been budgeted \$165 million as part of the war on terrorism), from February 1 to March 2, 10 suicide bombers killed

more than 400 people—a greater number than in any single country for any 31-day period since the September 11 attacks. Even a casual glance at media outlets and web sites sympathetic to Al Qaeda reveals a proliferating jihadist fraternity that is not deterred by Saddam Hussein's capture but rather takes heart from the fall of Iraq's secularist tyrant.<sup>18</sup>

In short, the record clearly demonstrates that military actions against terrorism and its purported sponsors have not come close to squelching suicide terror. At a minimum, an effective strategy for combating suicide terrorism requires a layered approach that works on three levels in a coordinated way:

- A last line of defense to protect sensitive populations and installations from attack. Mostly by developing and using scientific technology, efforts should be made to block suicide terrorists from hitting their targets or to lessen (by preemptively penetrating and destroying terror organizations and preparation) the effects of an attack that has not been prevented.
- A middle line of defense networks, mostly through a combination of intelligence and military action.
- A first line of defense to understand and act on the root causes of terrorism to reduce drastically the receptivity of potential recruits to the message and methods of terror-sponsoring organizations, mostly through political, economic, and social action programs.

**Relying on military force only mutates suicide networks and cells to meaner forms.**

Billions and billions of dollars have been allocated to countermeasures associated with the last and middle lines of defense (protection, mitigation, pre-emption). Unfortunately, the same U.S. federal interagency report that documents the significant increase in funding for combating terrorism and reviews plans and activities by dozens of civil and military agencies reveals scant evidence of serious effort or funding to understand why individuals become, or to prevent individuals from becoming, terrorists in the first place. Even more serious than the scarce interest and funding on this score thus far, however, is the fact that current U.S. policies that do attempt to address the underlying factors of suicide terrorism are woefully misguided. The record suggests that addressing these root causes might provide a more promising approach.

### **Misconceiving Root Causes**

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A common notion in the U.S. administration and media spin on the war on terrorism is that suicide attackers are evil, deluded, or homicidal misfits who thrive in poverty, ignorance, and anarchy. This portrayal lends a sense of hopelessness to any attempt to address root causes because some individuals will always be desperate or deranged enough to conduct suicide attacks. Nevertheless, as logical as the poverty-breeds-terrorism argument may seem, study after study shows that suicide attackers and their supporters are rarely ignorant or impoverished. Nor are they crazed, cowardly, apathetic, or asocial. The common misconception underestimates the central role that organizational factors play in the appeal of terrorist networks. A better understanding of such causes reveals that the challenge is actually manageable: the key is not to profile and target the most despairing or deranged individual but to understand and undermine the organizational and institutional appeal of terrorists' motivations and networks.

The U.S. *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* highlights the “War of Ideas” and “War on Poverty” as adjunct programs to reduce terrorism’s pool of support and recruitment.<sup>19</sup> The war of ideas is based on the premise that terrorists and their supporters “hate our freedoms,” a sentiment Bush has expressed with regard to Al Qaeda and the Iraqi resistance.<sup>20</sup> Yet, survey data reliably show that most Muslims who support suicide terrorism and trust bin Laden favor elected government, personal liberty, educational opportunity, and economic choice.<sup>21</sup> Mark Tessler, who coordinates long-term surveys of Muslim societies from the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research, finds that Arab attitudes toward American culture are most favorable among young adults—the same population that terrorist recruiters single out—regardless of their religious orientation.<sup>22</sup> Khalil

Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Survey and Policy Research, consistently finds that a majority of Palestinians has a favorable impression of U.S. (and Israeli) forms of government, education, economy, and even literature and art, even though about three-fourths of the population supports suicide attack.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, there is no evidence that most people who support suicide actions hate Americans' internal cultural freedoms, but rather every indication that they oppose U.S. foreign policies, particularly regarding the Middle East. After the 1996 suicide attack against U.S. military housing at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, a Defense Department Science Board report stated, "Historical data show a strong correlation between U.S. involvement in international situations and an increase in terrorist attacks against the United States."<sup>24</sup> U.S. intervention in Iraq is but the most recent example. A United Nations report indicated that, as soon as the United States began building up for the Iraq invasion, Al Qaeda recruitment picked up in 30–40 countries.<sup>25</sup> Recruiters for groups sponsoring terrorist acts reportedly told researchers that volunteers were beating down their doors to join.

Similarly, the war on poverty is based on the premise that impoverishment, lack of education, and social estrangement spawn terrorism. Economist Gary Becker's theory states that the greater the amount of human capital (including income and education) a person accumulates, the less likely that person is to commit a crime.<sup>26</sup> The theory is that the greater a person's human capital, the more that person is aware of losing out on substantial future gains if captured or killed. Similar thinking applies to suicide terror: the less promising one's future, the more likely one's choice to end life. Almost all current U.S. foreign aid programs related to terrorism pivot on such assumptions, now generally accepted by the mainstream of both U.S. political parties. Although the theory has proven useful in combating blue-collar crime, no evidence indicates its bearing on terror.

Studies by Princeton economist Alan Krueger and others find no correlation between a nation's per capita income and terrorism<sup>27</sup> but do find a correlation between a lack of civil liberties, defined by Freedom House,<sup>28</sup> and terrorism. A recent National Research Council report finds that "[t]errorism and its supporting audiences appear to be fostered by policies of extreme political repression and discouraged by policies of incorporating both dissident and moderate groups responsibly into civil society and the political process."<sup>29</sup> There seems to be a direct correlation between U.S. military aid to politically corroded or ethnically divided states,<sup>30</sup> human rights abuses by those regimes,<sup>31</sup> and the rise in terrorism,<sup>32</sup> as initially moderate opposition is pushed into common cause with more radical elements.

Despite these realities, the meager U.S. monies available for nonmilitary foreign aid are far too concentrated in poverty reduction and literacy enhancement. In fact, in Pakistan, literacy and dislike for the United States have increased while the number of Islamist *madrasa* schools grew from 3,000 to nearly 40,000 since 1978. According to a U.S. State Department report, development aid is based “on the belief that poverty provides a breeding ground for terrorism. The terrorist attacks of September 11 reaffirmed this conviction.”<sup>33</sup> Bush declared at a UN conference on poor nations in Monterrey, Mexico, that “[w]e fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, study after study demonstrates that suicide terrorists and their supporters are not abjectly poor, illiterate, or socially estranged.<sup>35</sup>

Another misconception that implicitly drives current national security policy is that suicide terrorists have no rational political agenda and are not sane. According to Gen. Wesley Clark, unlike nineteenth-century Russian terrorists who wanted to depose the czar, current Islamic terrorists are simply retrograde and nihilist: “They want the destruction of Western civilization and the return to seventh-century Islam.”<sup>36</sup> Senator John Warner (R-Va.) testified that a new security doctrine of preemption was necessary because “those who would commit suicide in their assaults on the free world are not rational.”<sup>37</sup> According to Vice President Dick Cheney, the September 11 plotters and other like-minded terrorists “have no sense of morality.”<sup>38</sup>

In truth, suicide terrorists on the whole have no appreciable psychopathology and are often wholly committed to what they believe to be devout moral principles. A report on *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism* used by the Central and Defense Intelligence Agencies (CIA and DIA) finds “no psychological attribute or personality distinctive of terrorists.”<sup>39</sup> Recruits are generally well adjusted in their families and liked by peers and often more educated and economically better off than their surrounding population. Researchers Basel Saleh and Claude Berrebi independently find that the majority of Palestinian suicide bombers have a college education (versus 15 percent of the population of comparable age) and that less than 15 percent come from poor families (although about one-third of the population lives in poverty). DIA sources who have interrogated Al Qaeda detainees at Guantanamo note that Saudi-born operatives, especially those in leadership positions, are often “educated above reasonable employment level, a surprising number have graduate degrees and come from high-status families.”<sup>40</sup>

**Current U.S. policies that attempt to address root causes are woefully misguided.**

The general pattern was captured in a Singapore parliamentary report on prisoners from Jemaah Islamiyah, an ally of Al Qaeda: "These men were not ignorant, destitute, or disenfranchised. Like many of their counterparts in militant Islamic organizations in the region, they held normal, respectable jobs. Most detainees regarded religion as their most important personal value."<sup>41</sup>

**There is no evidence that most who support suicide actions hate U.S. cultural freedoms.**

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Except for being mostly young, unattached males, suicide attackers differ from members of violent racist organizations to whom they are often compared, such as white supremacist groups in the United States.<sup>42</sup> Overall, suicide terrorists exhibit no socially dysfunctional attributes (fatherless, friendless, jobless) or suicidal symptoms. Inconsistent with economic theories of criminal behavior, they do not kill themselves simply out of hope-

lessness or a sense of having nothing to lose. Muslim clerics countenance killing oneself for martyrdom in the name of God but curse personal suicide. "He who commits suicide kills himself for his own benefit," warned Sheikh Yussuf Al-Qaradhawi (a spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood), but "he who commits martyrdom sacrifices himself for the sake of his religion and his nation. ... [T]he Mujahed is full of hope."<sup>43</sup>

Another reason that personal despair or derangement may not be a significant factor in suicide terrorism is that the cultures of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia where it thrives tend to be less individualistic than our own. These cultures are more attuned to the environmental and organizational relationships that shape behavior and are less tolerant of individuals acting independently from a group context.<sup>44</sup> Terrorists in these societies also would be more likely to be seeking a group, or collective, sense of belonging and justification for their actions.

A group struggling to gain power and resources against materially better-endowed enemies must attract able and committed recruits—not loaners—who are willing to give up their lives for a cause. At the same time, the group must prevent uncommitted elements in the population from simply free-riding on the backs of committed fighters, that is, sharing in the fighters' rewards and success without taking the risks or paying the costs of fighting. Insurgent groups manage this by offering potential recruits the promise of great future rewards instead of immediate gratification, such as freedom for future generations or eternal bliss in Paradise. Only individuals committed to delayed gratification are then liable to volunteer. Insurgent groups also tend to seek out individuals with better education and economic pros-

pects because they view a person who invests resources in education and training for a better economic future as a signal that that person is willing to sacrifice today's satisfactions for tomorrow's rewards and is able to realize commitments. For this reason, relative level of education and economic status is often higher among insurgent groups that recruit primarily on the basis of promises for the future than among traditional armies that rely more on short-term incentives.<sup>45</sup>

## **Relative Deprivation and Religious Redemption**

The connection among suicide and terrorists and religion might be explained by the role that religious ethnic groups can play. Ethnic groups offer a good foundation for sustaining resource-deficient insurgencies because they provide a social structure that can underpin the maintenance of reputations and the efficient gathering of information about recruits. Yet, ethnicity alone may not be enough; religion may also be needed to cement commitment. A comparison of ethnic Palestinians with ethnic Bosnian Muslims (matched for age, income, education, exposure to violence, etc.) shows the Palestinians much more liable to use religious sentiments to express hope for the future confidently by being willing to die for the group, whereas the Bosnians do not express religious sentiments, hope, or a willingness to die.<sup>46</sup> Martyrdom, which involves "pure" commitment to promise over payoff and unconditional sacrifice for fictive "brothers," will more likely endure in religious ethnic groups.

None of this denies that popular support for terrorism is sustained in part by economic factors, such as explosive population growth and underemployment, coupled with the failure of rigidly authoritarian governments to provide youth outlets for political and economic advancement. Middle Eastern and, more broadly, most Muslim societies, whose populations are doubling within one generation or less, have age pyramids with broad bases: each younger age group is substantially larger (or has more people) than the next older. Even with states that allowed for a modicum of political expression or economic employment, society's structure of opportunities can have trouble keeping pace with population.

Regional governments are increasingly unable to provide these opportunities, enhancing the attractiveness of religious organizations that are able to recruit tomorrow's suicide terrorists. Weak and increasingly corrupt and corroded nationalist regimes in Muslim countries have sought to eliminate all secular opposition. To subdue popular discontent in the postcolonial era, the Ba'thist socialist dictators of Syria and Iraq; the authoritarian prime ministers of Pakistan and Malaysia; the monarchs of Morocco and Jordan;

and the imperial presidents of Egypt, Algeria, the Philippines, and Indonesia all initially supported militant Islamic groups. To maintain their bloated bureaucracies and armies, these failed states—all poor imitations of Western models with no organic history in the Arab and Muslim world—readily delegated responsibility for the social welfare of their peoples to activist Islamic groups eager to take charge. These groups provided schooling and health services more efficiently and extensively than governments could, offering a

**Suicide terrorism becomes perceived to be an altruistic act for a future generation.**

desecularized path to fulfill modernity's universal mission to improve humanity. When radical Islam finally vented political aspirations, beginning with the 1965 "Islamic Manifesto," *Milestones*, written in prison by the Muslim Brotherhood's Sayyid Qutb just before he was hanged for sedition by Egyptian leader Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser, popular support proved too deep and widespread to extinguish.

Although the process of rising aspirations followed by dwindling expectations that generates terror can be identified, disentangling the relative significance of political and economic factors in the Muslim world is difficult and perhaps even impossible. During the 1990s, momentous political developments in Algeria (multiparty elections, including Islamic groups in 1992), Palestine (Oslo peace accords in 1993), Chechnya (dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of Communist control), Indonesia (Suharto's resignation in 1998 and the end of dictatorship), and elsewhere fanned rising aspirations among Muslim peoples for political freedom and economic advancement. In each case, economic stagnation or decline followed as political aspirations were thwarted (the Algerian army cancelled elections, the Israel-Palestine Camp David negotiations broke down, Russia cracked down on Chechnya's bid for autonomy, and Suharto army loyalists and paramilitary groups fomented interethnic strife and political discord).

Support and recruitment for suicide terrorism occur not under conditions of political repression, poverty, and unemployment or illiteracy as such but when converging political, economic, and social trends produce diminishing opportunities relative to expectations, thus generating frustrations that radical organizations can exploit. For this purpose, relative deprivation is more significant than absolute deprivation. Unlike poorer, less-educated elements of their societies, or equally educated, well-off members of our society, many educated, middle-class Muslims increasingly experience frustration with life as their potential opportunities are less attractive than their prior expecta-

tions. Frustrated with their future, the appeal of routine national life declines, and suicide terrorism gives some perceived purpose to act altruistically, in the potential terrorist's mind, for the welfare of a future generation. Revolutionary terror imprints itself into history when corrupt and corroded societies choke rising aspirations into explosive frustration.

## Organization and the Banality of Evil

This frustrating confluence of circumstances helps to account for terrorism's popular support and endurance but not the original spark that ignites people's passions and minds. Most people in the world who suffer stifling, even murderous oppression do not become terrorists. As with nearly all creators and leaders of history's terrorist movements, those who conceive of using suicide terrorism in the first place belong mostly to an intellectual elite possessing sufficient material means for personal advancement but who choose a life of struggle and sacrifice for themselves and who often require even greater commitment from their followers. They are motivated not by personal comfort or immediate material gain but rather by religious or ideological conviction and zeal, whose founding assumptions, like those of any religion, cannot be rationally scrutinized and for which they inspire others to believe in and die.

Sponsors of martyrdom are not irrational. Using religious sentiments for political or economic purposes can be eminently rational, as when martyrdom or missionary actions gain recognition, recruits, and power to increase political "market share"<sup>47</sup> (to gain in the competition for political influence in a regional context, within the larger Muslim community, or with the rest of the world). Dwindling returns on individuals' future prospects in life translate into higher levels of recruitment and prompt returns for terrorist groups and leaders. This degree of manipulation usually works, however, only if the manipulators themselves make costly, hard-to-fake commitments.

Through indoctrination of recruits into relatively small and closeted cells—emotionally tight-knit brotherhoods—terror organizations create a family of cellmates who are just as willing to sacrifice for one another as a parent for a child. Consider the "Oath to Jihad" taken by recruits to Harkat ul-Mujahedeen, a Pakistani affiliate of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders, the umbrella organization formed by bin Laden in 1998. The oath affirms that by their sacrifice members help secure the future of their family of fictive kin: "Each [martyr] has a special place—among them are brothers, just as there are sons and those even more dear."<sup>48</sup> These culturally contrived cell loyalties mimic and (at least temporarily) override genetically based fidelities to kin while securing belief in sacrifice



## Sponsors of martyrdom are not irrational.

to a larger group cause. The mechanism of manipulation resembles that of the U.S. Army (and probably most armies), which trains soldiers in small groups of committed buddies, who then grow willing to sacrifice for one another and only derivatively for glory or country.

Key to intercepting that commitment before it solidifies is grasping how, like the best commercial advertisers but to ghastlier effect, charismatic lead-

ers of terrorist groups turn ordinary desires for kinship and religion into cravings for the mission they are pitching, to the benefit of the manipulating organization rather than the individual manipulated. Therefore, understanding and parrying suicide terrorism requires concentrating more on the organizational structure, indoctrination methods, and ideological appeal of recruiting organizations than on personality attributes of the individuals re-

cruited. No doubt individual predispositions render some more susceptible to social factors that leaders use to persuade recruits to die for their cause, but months, sometimes years, of intense indoctrination can lead to blind obedience no matter whom the individual.<sup>49</sup>

Part of the answer to what leads a normal person to suicide terror may lie in philosopher Hannah Arendt's notion of the "banality of evil," which she used to describe the recruitment of mostly ordinary Germans, not sadistic lunatics, to man Nazi extermination camps.<sup>50</sup> In the early 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram tested her thesis. He recruited Yale students and other U.S. adults supposedly to help others learn better. When the learner, hidden by a screen, failed to memorize arbitrary word pairs fast enough, the helper was instructed to administer an electric shock and to increase voltage with each erroneous answer (which the learner, actually an actor, deliberately got wrong). Most helpers complied with instructions to give potentially lethal shocks (labeled as 450 volts, but in fact 0) despite victims' screams and pleas. This experiment showed how situations can be staged to elicit blind obedience to authority and more generally that manipulation of context can trump individual personality and psychology to generate apparently extreme behaviors in ordinary people.<sup>51</sup>

Social psychologists have long documented what they call "the fundamental attribution error," the tendency for people to explain human behavior in terms of individual personality traits, even when significant situational factors in the larger society are at work. This attribution error leads many in the West to focus on the individual suicide terrorists rather than the organizational environment that produces them. If told that someone has been ordered to give a speech supporting a particular political candidate, for

example, most people in Western society will still think that the speaker believes what he is saying. This interpretation bias seems to be especially prevalent in individualistic cultures, such as those of the United States and western Europe, as opposed to collectivist cultures, such as Africa and Asia. Portrayals by the U.S. government and media of suicide bombers as deranged cut-throats may also suffer from a fundamental attribution error: no instance has yet occurred of religious or political suicide terrorism resulting from the lone action of a mentally unstable bomber (e.g., a suicidal Unabomber) or someone acting entirely under his own authority and responsibility (e.g., a suicidal Timothy McVeigh). The key is the organization, not the individual.

For organizations that sponsor suicide attack to thrive or even survive against much stronger military foes, they need strong community support. Yet, the reasons for that communal support can differ among peoples. Among Palestinians, perceptions of historical injustice combine with personal loss and humiliation at the hands of their Israeli occupiers to nurture individual martyrs and general popular support for martyr actions. Saleh observes that a majority of Palestinian suicide bombers had prior histories of arrest or injury by Israel's army, and many of the youngest suicide shooters had family members or close friends with such a history.<sup>52</sup> Khalil Shikaki, the psychologist and Director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, has preliminary survey data suggesting that popular support for suicide actions may be positively correlated with the number of Israeli checkpoints that Palestinians have to pass through regularly to go about their daily business and the time needed to pass through them (this can involve spending hours at each of several checkpoints, any of which can be arbitrarily closed down at any time to prevent passage). Humiliation and revenge are the most consistent sentiments expressed by recruits as well as their supporters.

Although individual grievances generate support for terrorists and motivate some people to become recruits, debriefings with captured Al Qaeda operatives at Guantanamo and with Jemaah Islamiyah prisoners in Singapore suggest that recruitment to these organizations is more ideologically driven than grievance-driven. Detainees evince little history of personal hardship but frequently cite relatives or respected community members who participated in earlier jihads, or close peers presently engaged, as influencing decisions to join the fight.<sup>53</sup> Of course, ideology and grievance are not mutually exclusive. Jessica Stern's interviews with jihadists and their supporters in Kashmir reveal that both abound.<sup>54</sup>

Despite numerous studies of individual behavior that show situation to be a much better predictor than personality in group contexts, Americans overwhelmingly believe that personal decision, success, and failure depend on

individual choice, responsibility, and personality. This perception is plausibly one reason many Americans tend to think of terrorists as homicidal maniacs. "If we have to, we just mow the whole place down," said Senator Trent Lott (R-Miss.), exasperated with the situation in Iraq. "You're dealing with insane suicide bombers who are killing our people, and we need to be very aggressive in taking them out."<sup>55</sup> As Timothy Spangler, chairman of Republicans Abroad (a group of Americans living overseas that helps the Republican Party develop policy) recently put it, "We know what the causes of terrorism are—terrorists. ... It's ultimately about individuals taking individual decisions to kill people."<sup>56</sup> According to last year's Pew survey, most of the world disagrees.<sup>57</sup> Although we cannot do much about personality traits, whether biologically influenced or not, we presumably can think of nonmilitary ways to make terrorist groups less attractive and undermine their effectiveness with recruits. That holds the key to defeating terrorism.

### **Soft Power Counterstrategy**

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The basis of community support for organizations that sponsor terrorism needs to be the prime long-term focus of U.S. policymakers and others who are interested in combating the threat such organizations pose. For without community support, terrorist organizations that depend on dense networks of ethnic and religious ties for information, recruitment, and survival cannot thrive. No evidence, historical or otherwise, indicates that popular support for suicide terrorism will evaporate or that individuals will cease to be persuaded by terrorist groups' promises of future rewards without complicity in tackling at least some fundamental goals that suicide attackers and supporting communities share, such as denying support to discredited governments and making maximum efforts to end the conflict in the Palestinian territories, whose daily images of violence engender global Muslim resentment. Republicans and Democrats alike clamor for the allocation of billions of dollars to protect innumerable targets from suicide attackers. Guarding sensitive installations is a last line of defense, however, and probably the easiest line to breach because of the abundance of vulnerable targets and would-be attackers.

Preempting and preventing terrorism requires that U.S. policymakers make a concerted effort to understand the background conditions as well as the recruitment processes that inspire people to take their own lives in the name of a greater cause. Current political and economic conditions that policymakers currently monitor are important but not necessarily determinant. Rather, what likely matters more is the promise of redeeming real or imagined historical grievances through a religious (or transcendent ideologi-

cal) mission that empowers the militarily weak with unexpected force against enemies materially much stronger. This was as true for Jewish zealots who sacrificed themselves to kill Romans two millennia ago as it is for modern jihadists.

Identifying sacred values in different cultures and how they compete for people's affections is surely a first step in learning how to prevent those values from spiraling into mortal conflict between societies. All religions are based on sacred values, as are many quasi-religious ideologies that make claims about laws of history or universal missions to reform humanity.<sup>58</sup> Such values are linked to emotions that underpin feelings of cultural identity and trust. These emotion-laden sentiments are amplified into moral obligations to strike out against perceived opponents no matter the cost when conditions of relative deprivation get to a point where suicide terrorists actively seek alternatives because of lack of political and economic opportunity.

Such sentiments are characteristic of apparently irrational, emotionally driven commitments, including heartfelt romantic love and uncontrollable vengeance, that may have emerged under natural selection's influence to override rational calculations based on seemingly impossible or very long odds of achieving individual goals, such as lasting security.<sup>59</sup> In religiously inspired suicide terrorism, these sentiments are again manipulated by organizational leaders, recruiters, and trainers, mostly for the organization's benefit at the expense of the individual. Such manipulation is an extreme form of a common practice in which society's ruling management demands readiness-to-die from its own members—and occasional execution of this demand—as a demonstration of faith in society. In times of crisis, every society routinely calls on some of its own people to sacrifice their lives for the general good of the body politic. For militant jihadists, crisis is constant and unabating, and extreme sacrifice is necessary as long as there are nonbelievers (*kuffar*) in the world.

Policy may head off this downward spiral toward mortal conflict between incommensurable moral views of the world by helping to provide political and economic opportunity for some. Once that spiral starts for others, however, the task becomes much more difficult. Once values become sacred, negotiated trade-offs based on balancing costs and benefits become taboo—much like selling off one's child or selling out one's country would be, no matter the payoff—and offers of compromise or exchange are met with moral out-

**Making terrorist organizations seem less attractive holds the key to defeating terrorism.**

rage. Counting on military pressure, the economic power of globalization, or the Western media's powers of persuasion to get others to give up such values is probably a vain hope. Policymakers from nations that fight sacred terror and hope to defeat it need to circumscribe the point at which commitment becomes absolute and nonnegotiable and seek to reach people before they come to it.

Traditional top-heavy approaches, such as strategic bombardment, invasion, occupation, and other massive forms of coercion, cannot eliminate tac-

tically innovative and elusive jihadist swarms nor suppress their popular support. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center released in March 2004, nearly half of Pakistanis and substantial majorities of people in supposedly moderate Muslim countries such as Morocco and Jordan now support suicide bombings as a way of countering the application of military might by the United States in Iraq and by Israel in Palestine.<sup>60</sup>

**Good vs. Evil  
rhetoric feeds  
jihadism's religious  
conviction, zeal, and  
its power to recruit.**

Rather than focusing on hard power as a last defense, the first line of defense should be convincing Muslim communities to stop supporting religious schools and charities that feed terrorist networks. For example, just a small percentage of what the United States spends on often ineffective counterinsurgency aid to unpopular governments can help to train teachers and administrators, build schools and dormitories, furnish books and computers, provide fellowships and stipends, and fund local invitations for all willing parties to discuss and debate. Radical Islamic and other terrorist groups often provide more and better educational, medical, and social welfare services than governments do; democratic nations that fight terrorism therefore must discretely help others in these societies to compete with, rather than attempt to crush, such programs for the bodies, minds, and hearts of people.

Clearly, shows of military strength are not the way to end the growing menace of suicide terrorism: witness the failure of Israel's and Russia's coercive efforts to end strings of Palestinian and Chechen suicide bombings. Rather, those nations most threatened by suicide terrorism, the world's democracies in particular, must show people the aspects of democratic cultures they most respect. These nations should promote democracy but also must be ready to accept democracy's paradox: if people choose representatives whom the United States and its democratic allies dislike or who have different values or ways of doing things, voters' decisions still must be accepted as long as the outcome does not generate violence. Democratic self-determina-

tion in Palestine, Kashmir, and Iraq, or for that matter Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Saudi Arabia, will more likely reduce terrorism than would additional military and counterinsurgency aid. At the same time, the United States and its allies need to establish an intense dialogue with Muslim religious and community leaders to reconcile Islamic custom and religious law (*shari'a*) with internationally recognized standards for crime, punishment, and human rights.

To address the problem of relative deprivation, the United States and its allies should promote economic choice. Yet, people must be allowed to pick and choose the goods and values they desire and not be forced to privatize their traditional ways of trading and doing business any more than they should be forced to collectivize. In other words, people should not be made to accept goods and values that they may not want in the name of "free markets" or "globalization." Most importantly, the United States and its allies should actively seek to redress the denial of civil liberties by withdrawing military and political support from those of its partners in the war on terrorism who persistently infringe on human rights and deny political expression to their people and by encouraging moderates to debate alternative visions for their societies constructively. These new partners in the war on terrorism cited by the General Accounting Office, for example, are the Eurasian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia. All but Tajikistan and, just recently, Georgia are run by former Communist Party leaders—turned-nationalists, whose rule, like Saddam's, involves brutal personality cults.<sup>61</sup> Of course, the United States cannot unilaterally pull out of places that would then be threatened with collapse or hostile takeover. At the same time, long-term planning must not allow the United States and its allies to become embroiled in maintaining brutal and repressive regimes whose practices generate popular resentment and terrorism. Candor and argumentation with open dissent instill confidence, but propaganda and manipulative public relations breed disaffection and distrust.

In addition, because it is the main target and foe of suicide attacks by jihadists, the United States must work in concert with the international community to address the historical and personal grievances, whether perceived or actual, of people who have been denied opportunity and power to realize their hopes and aspirations for personal security, collective peace, environmental sustainability, and cultural fulfillment. The festering conflicts and killing fields of Israel/Palestine, Pakistan/Kashmir/India, Russia/Chechnya, the Western Sahara, Mindanao, the Moluccas, or Bosnia should be as much of a concern and a catalyst for action as the current state of the world economy.

## The United States has to stop insisting on planetary rights of interference

Finally, the United States has to stop insisting on planetary rights of interference in the belief that our vision of civilization is humanity's last great hope or that U.S. national security depends on the world accepting "a single sustainable model of national success... right and true for every person, in every society."<sup>62</sup> "America is a nation with a mission," proclaimed Bush in his 2004 State of the Union address. Yet, a key lesson of the Vietnam War,

according to former defense secretary Robert McNamara, was the error in thinking "we're on a mission. We weren't then and we aren't today. And we shouldn't act unilaterally militarily under any circumstances. We don't have the God-given right to shape every nation to our own image."<sup>63</sup> The new *National Security Strategy of the United States* frames the United States' new global mission in words the president first used at the U.S. National Cathedral

three days after the September 11 attacks: "[O]ur responsibility to history is... to rid the world of evil." Of course, exorcising the world's evil, or even all forms of terrorism, is as much an impossible mission as forever ending injustice. This publicized mission that pits the United States' moral world of good against the jihadist world of evil directly parallels the jihadist division of the world between "The House of Islam" (*Dar al-Islam*) and "The House of War" (*Dar al-Harb*) and feeds jihadism's religious conviction and zeal as well as its power to persuade recruits. Such rhetoric does the United States and its allies no good.

Of course, none of this necessitates negotiating with terrorist groups that sponsor martyrs in the pursuit of goals such as Al Qaeda's quest to replace the Western-inspired system of nation-states with a global caliphate. Bin Laden and others affiliated with the mission of the World Islamic Front seek no compromise and will probably fight with hard power to the death. For these groups and already committed individuals, using hard power is necessary. The tens of millions of people who for now only sympathize with bin Laden are likely open to the promise of soft-power<sup>64</sup> alternatives that most Muslims seem to favor: elected government, freedom of expression, educational opportunity, economic choice. Although such soft-power efforts may demand more patience than governments under attack or under pressure to reform typically tolerate politically in times of crisis, forbearance is necessary. To be effective, the historical precondition for such opportunity, as well as the popular legitimacy of any form of governance, is to ensure that potential recruits in the Arab and Muslim world feel secure about their personal safety as well as their cultural heritage.

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